

Rural Development highlights programs

By RACHAEL BOSSOW, Times Staff Writer

Community leaders, elected officials and business owners learned about economic development initiatives that are available through the United States Department of Agriculture's Rural Development program at a conference at Fort Leavenworth on Tuesday.

Chuck Banks, state director of Rural Development, discussed an economic development program that is currently in use at Fort Riley. The Base Realignment and closure process has resulted in additional servicemen being transferred to both Fort Riley and Fort Leavenworth.

"We are the lead federal agency to serve economic development needs of rural communities," Banks said.

The Fort Riley Regional Initiative is designed to help serve the housing needs of soldiers. Because of Fort Riley's location, numerous small communities in the area will see an increase in population. Rural Development also opened an office on post at Fort Riley, the first in the nation to do so. "It's an innovative effort in Kansas," Banks said. "Many communities are experiencing population declines and are on a downward trend. This is a great partnership with the communities."

The success of the Fort Riley Regional Initiative has prompted efforts to establish a similar program at Fort Leavenworth. Interested persons can apply for a low-interest direct loan or guaranteed loan from Rural Development.

"We are proud of what we've been able to accomplish," Banks said.

Harold Stones, special projects director for Senator Pat Roberts' office in Topeka, said the initiative comes at an exciting time for Kansas.

"When you're talking economic development, it comes from local leadership," Stones said.

"The agencies can make a difference." Congressman Jim Ryun also spoke during the opening session. "There is a great need out there — a lot of military installations are in need of housing," Ryun said. "I know what we are doing here is important."

Bill Moore, the area director of Rural Development for northeast and north central Kansas, focused on quality of life for residents.

"We are passionate about the military and quality of life," Moore said. "The soldiers deserve it just like everyone else."



(Times photo/Rachael Bossow) Dave Kramer speaks to local business owners and community leaders about Business and Industry loans available through Rural Development on Tuesday at the Frontier Conference Center.

Several break-out sessions were available for persons attending the conference, including information on business and community grant programs, public bodies and infrastructure and non-profit organizations.

Dave Kramer, Community and Business program specialist, spoke about several loan programs through the Fort Leavenworth Regional Initiative. The Business and Industry Guaranteed Loan Program is designed to give loans for businesses.

"We're making loans in rural communities for businesses that will last," Kramer said.

Rural Development defines a rural community as a city with less than 50,000 residents. Any legal entity, including individuals, public and private organizations and federally-recognized Indian tribal groups can apply for the B&I program.

"It can be for both startups or expanding businesses," Kramer said. "(The loan) can be used for a wide variety of things." The B&I program does not allow funds to be used as a line of credit, for agricultural production that is not part of an integrated business, for charitable and educational institutions or as a loan for a golf course or gambling establishments. The program benefits businesses by having larger loan amounts and lower interest rates available. After completing an application, businesses will have a response within two weeks. The B&I program had a loan allocation of more than \$11 million in fiscal year 2006.

"It varies from year to year — we are not limited to this," Kramer said. "It's a billion dollar program nationwide."

Gary Smith, Community and Business program director, discussed renewable energy projects in Kansas, such as ethanol or wind generation. The Farm Bill Section 9006 will provide matching funds from \$2,500 to \$500,000 for the purchase of renewable energy systems or to make energy efficiency improvements. The projects must be located in a rural area.

"The grant is based on demonstrated financial need," Smith said.

For more information about the Fort Leavenworth Regional Initiative or Rural Development programs, visit www.rurdev.usda.gov/ks.